

The Evening Bulletin Suburban Nor

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OPERATING TRANSCEIVER in the mobile communications van is Edward J. Jars. The communications center stands ready to help with Civil Defense work and in emergencies when regular communications lines are out.



INSIDE OF FORMER SCHOOL BUS serves as the mobile communications unit that services the five-county area. H. Paul Bohlander (left) and Clinton R. (Jim) Spencer (right) find that the accoustics are excellent for a radio center.

School Bus Converted To Mobile Radio Unit

By JUDY TUCKER

What appeared at first to be an ordinary yellow school bus stood in a far corner of the Edge Hill Fire Company parking lot at Limekiln pike and Cricket av. in Abington Township.

But neighbors and passerby saw on closer inspection that the neat black letters along the side of the vehicle did not spell out the name of the local school district.

Instead, they read "Phil-Mont Mobile Radio Club, Inc."

seven antennas, each one reaching to just under the 14 feet legal limit.

THIS WAS AN UNUSUAL VEHICLE. Built originally in 1959 as a regulation, 54-seat school bus, it had been torn apart, had been renovated and had been turned into a mobile communications van or an emergency message control center. It serves five counties: Montgomery, Bucks and Delaware in Pennsylvania, and Camden and Burlington in New Jersey.

The bus, rebuilt and fur-



CHECKING MAPS FOR COORDINATES are (left to right) H. Paul Bohlander and Clinton R. (Jim) Spencer. The Phil-Mont Radio Club has the

Yellow School Bus Is Converted to Mobile Radio Center

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to help with Civil Defense work, in emergencies where regular communications lines are out and at special events, such as model aircraft meets and golf matches.

Clinton R. (Jim) Spencer, of 124 Central av., North Hills, knows a great deal about the Phil-Mont Club and the bus it operates.

He was one of the six Glenside-area "mobileers" who began the club in 1949.

"What are mobileers?" he said. "Well, I guess you could say that we are all 'hams' or amateur radio operators, who like to operate our equipment from cars."

"ONE DAY IN 1949 some of us got together and decided that it was pretty foolish for us all to be running around and talking to each other without any organization," the 46-year-old radio operator who is actually a self-employed building contractor said. "And let's face it, besides having fun with our sets, we wanted to have a real purpose and maybe do something for the community."

"So the six of us got some space at the War Memorial Building on Keswick av. in Glenside, and within about six to eight months we had a membership of over 50," he said.

The Phil-Mont club met in Glenside once a month and offered its services to anyone who could use them. The club marshaled parades, relayed

membership fee of \$6 from each of the mobileers and by holding used equipment auctions, the club raised enough money by 1960 to purchase a 28-foot house trailer.

For the next seven years, the club operated happily and efficiently out of the new mobile center, but soon its activities increased again and the names of 128 members filled the pages of the club roster.

Then one night, at a regular club meeting, someone came up with the idea of buying a second-hand bus to replace the trailer.

"We found a 37-foot used school bus up in Reading," Spencer said. "It was perfect for our needs and we were able to get it for \$1,000."

THE CLUB MEMBERS spent an additional \$2,500 on building materials and went to work renovating the interior of their big, new communications center.

"First, we stripped the bus of all its seats and we put in a five kilowatt gasoline generator in a four-inch-thick soundproof fireproof compartment at the rear," he said. "We added air-conditioning, electric heat, a dial intercom system, telephones, a teletype, a burglar alarm system, storage space and even a galley with a sink and a single electric burner."

"The roof of the bus is a maze of antennas, including a 49 foot collapsible mast for lower frequencies," he said.

"There are several dozen communications vans of this type in the United States, but to our knowledge, this is the only one of its kind in the

removable to get at the wide storage bins below.

THE BUS FLOOR is now carpeted and the ceiling and walls are covered with sound-absorbing tile. The acoustics are excellent for a radio center.

There is an elaborate electronic board that can patch — interconnect — any two pieces of communication gear outside the center. There is also a public address system, with its two speakers at the front of the vehicle, capable of sending messages for a distance of four city blocks.

At the extreme rear of the van are the tiny galley, the air-conditioning equipment and a back door.

"Our biggest problem back here," Spencer, pointing to the single-burner stove said, "is furnishing enough coffee for our operators."

Spencer explained to the shopping center visitors that the call letters of the bus unit are W3QV — "W 3 Queen Victoria," is what the operators said on the air.

"These were the call letters of W. Bradley Martin, a very active amateur radio operator, here in Abington, who passed away in 1967," he said. "We applied for his designation and this is now what is referred to as a 'memorial station.'"

Although there has not been a major communication emergency since 1955, the bus stands ready, 24 hours a day, so that it will be set to move when a call comes in from a neighboring municipality, the Red Cross or the state di-

On the first Monday of each month, the Phil-Mont club meets at the Franklin Institute and Spencer drives the big yellow bus to the Institute, where it is put on display.

"The only trouble I have is

that all of those cars pile up behind me," Spencer said. "No one passes because they're sure I'm driving a school bus."

"I guess when it needs a new paint job," he said, "we'll choose something besides yellow."



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CHECKING MAPS FOR COORDINATES are (left to right) Fred M. Bauer, Robert E. Mynster and Clinton R. Spencer. The Phil-Mont Radio Club has the necessary electronic equipment to cover all amateur bands, including intercommunications with the Civil Air Patrol, private craft and citizens band operators.

area golf matches, and became an official unit at the regional and national model airplane meets where it followed and recovered wayward, free-flying model aircraft.

"That's really something," Spencer said. "One time, we followed a model plane from the meet at Willow Grove clear over to Lakehurst, N.J."

THE FIRST YEAR the mobileers operated out of their own cars, but by 1950 the members decided that they needed some sort of control center that would serve as headquarters, but could be moved into any area where communication help was needed.

The members voted to invest in a small trailer that any one of the members would be able to pull behind his own automobile.

They located an eight-foot trailer and outfitted it themselves with basic communications equipment.

Five years later, came Hurricane Diane and the devastating floods that resulted along the Delaware River in Bucks County.

The Phil-Mont club was ready to swing into action when the call came for help. Each of the members readied his own ham equipment. One man hitched the little trailer to his car, and the group headed toward Yardley.

The group arrived to find all lines of communication down or out of order. The Red Cross was desperately in need of help in locating temporary living quarters, food and clothing for the flood victims.

This was the club's first big job and it was handled well. Today the members still take pride in showing off the official green and white, framed citation from the American Radio Relay League commending them for their service.

"THAT HURRICANE in 1955 did point up one thing to us," Spencer said. "We realized that our communications center in the little eight-foot trailer and our home-brew equipment were fairly inadequate."

By collecting an annual

pletely assembled with funds furnished by an amateur radio organization alone," he said.

The others have been financed by municipal governments or Civil Defense units.

Although the Phil-Mont mobileers purchased the bus, furnished and equipped it themselves at a total cost of almost \$5,000 in materials and labor, it became apparent that the club would have a difficult time paying the annual bills for its upkeep.

So Abington Township made an agreement with the radio club: If the bus were made available for township use, Abington would in return license and insure the vehicle annually.

As part of the club's continuing public relations program and to encourage interest in amateur radio, the renovated school bus was often taken from the firehouse parking lot to local shopping centers. There shoppers were invited to step aboard and to view the elaborate, well-equipped van as club members enacted emergency situations.

VISITORS CLIMBED UP the high bus steps and found themselves in the front section or lobby of the van. Under a sign that says "Welcome — Amateur Radio Communication is a Hobby With a Purpose," is the driver's seat. It has a sturdy black steering wheel and wide instrument panel. At the right, just inside the door, there are a telephone and a teletype machine that can send messages at the rate of 60 words per minute.

Behind this small section — closed off with two Plexiglas windows but accessible to operators by a central door — is the heart of the communications center: Six separate operating stations, each ready with the necessary electronic equipment to cover all amateur radio bands including intercommunications with the Civil Air Patrol, private aircraft and citizens band operators.

The operating stations — three on each side of the bus — are built-in desks made out of light green Formica. Their individual benches are the original gray bus seats, made

rector in Harrisburg.

THE PHIL-MONT club also sponsors the model amateur radio station located in the Hall of Electrical Communications at the Franklin Institute in center city. This is W3TKQ, well-known call letters throughout the world.

Dr. W. Laurence LePage, chairman of the board of the Franklin Institute and a member of the Phil-Mont club, said "This (club) is a thrilling group and I'm very proud to belong."

"As for the bus, in my judgement, the idea of it is the very essence of the club and its outlook: The mobile unit has no real value to the club, but it is maintained because of its tremendous potential value to the community, not only in emergencies, but also as a communications center for public events," he said.

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